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ABSTRACT

This report, first of a projected annual series, focuses on the key commitments of the mission statement of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and highlights new Commission initiatives. The issue opens with two essays related to the Commission's purposes: "Serving the Common Good in a Diverse Society" by Charlie Nelms and "Serving the Common Good: Consultant-Evaluators in the Heart of Peer Review" by Steven D. Crow. A collaborative visit profile describes online programs at North Dakota State University. Profiles are also provided of three institutions (Concordia University, Crowder College, and Fort Hays State University) that are partners in the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP). Partner profiles are presented for Northland College and Minnesota State College-Southeast Central as participants in the Joint Commission/American Association for Higher Education assessment workshops. A final partner profile describes the linking of AQIP and assessment at Kent State University. (SLD)

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Synthesis

2001

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

NCA

An Annual Publication of The Higher Learning Commission

ED 470 583

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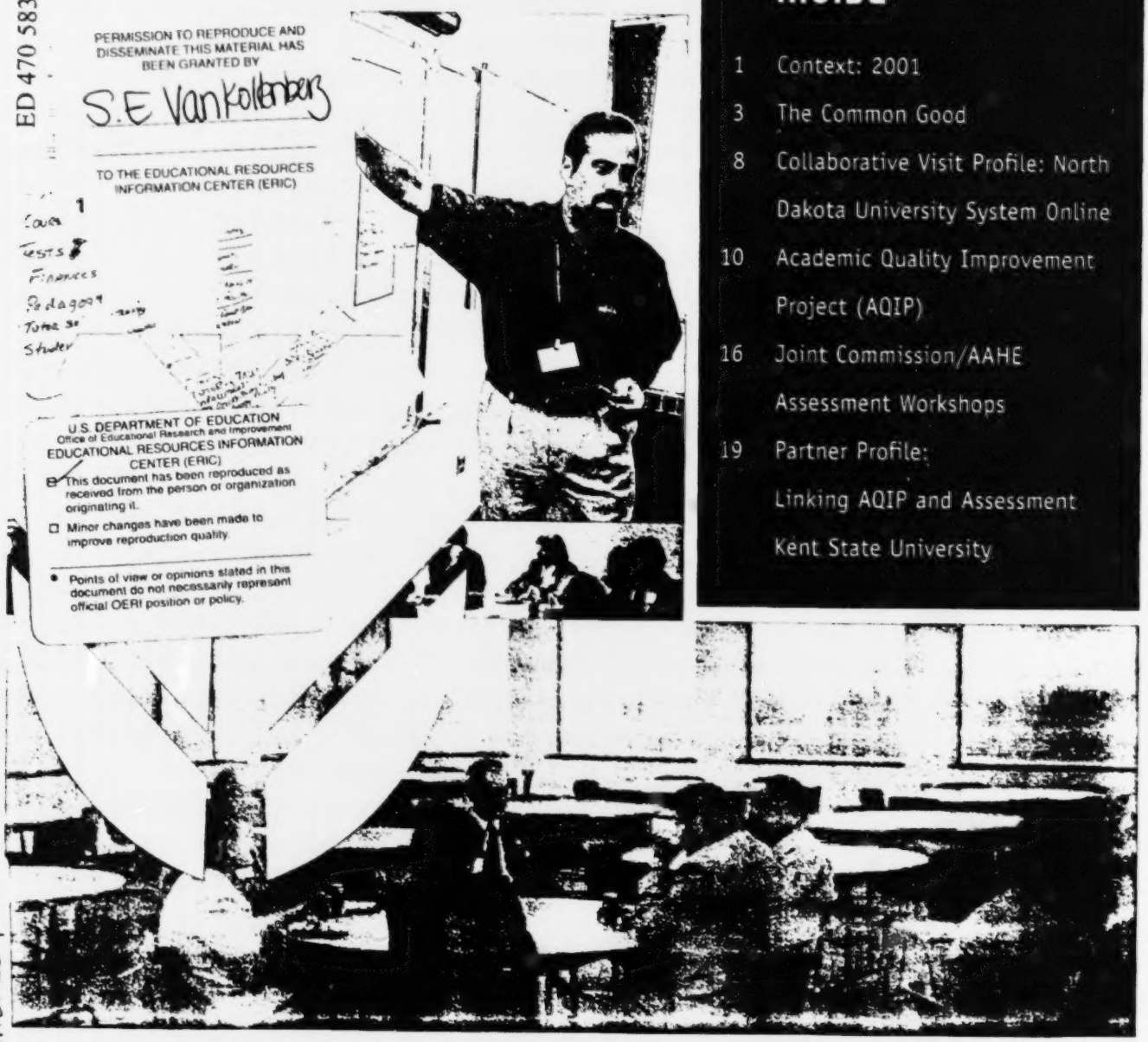

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Synthesis

An Annual Publication of The Higher Learning Commission

December 1, 2001

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Dear Colleague:

Four years ago, when the Board of Trustees went about the business of restructuring itself and the Commission, it pledged to strengthen communication with various constituents through many vehicles, including an expanded web site and the publication of an annual report. The web site is, we are proud to say, quite expanded and proving to be of great value to the Commission's work and that of its institutional members. The promised annual report—whatever that document was intended to be—failed to get published as, year after year, other projects absorbed the time and energy of the staff and the Board.

This year, Associate Director Susan Van Kollenburg and I decided that our excuses were tired and old; this year, the Board's pledge would be fulfilled.

We realized that the strength of the Commission's web site would never replace a well-written and well-designed piece of print. So, with professional consulting and help, we designed this publication to allow for voices of several constituents to be heard, to focus on key commitments contained in the Commission's mission statement, and to highlight new Commission initiatives. We hired Brian Tell to edit and write the text, knowing that through his eyes and ears we would gain a voice both objective and fluent. We turned to Kathleen Herring to create the visual layout. Together through the design process we came to understand that the Commission, in many different ways, is creating new programs and processes because of intentional new interactions with a broad variety of constituents. These new programs and processes represent the synthesis between the Commission's values and vision and the demands and interests of others.

So this publication, *Synthesis*, was born. We intend to publish it annually, maintaining a similar focus on voice , commitments, and initiatives. I welcome your comments about its usefulness and your suggestions for its improvement.

Sincerely,

Steven D. Crow

STEVEN D. CROW
Executive Director

CONTEXT: 2001

synthesis (ˈsin(t)thəsəs) *n.* [Gr < syn-, together + *tithenai*, to place, to do] **1** the putting together of parts or elements so as to form a whole. **2** a whole made up of parts or elements put together.

"Synthesis." This is a word used easily and freely within the higher education community. For academicians across all disciplines, evaluation of student learning usually involves determining a student's capacity to synthesize ideas and modes of thinking. In the Sciences, many fields of study require a mastery of the impact of synthesis on physical materials, chemical compounds, and biological systems. But "synthesis" is not the word that comes to mind when talking about accreditation, even accreditation of organizations committed to quality in higher learning.

By choosing the word as the title of this new publication, the Commission proposes that its mission, vision, and values will be honored and furthered through synthesis. As with the higher education institution, synthesis within the Commission occurs in many ways, each equally important to the vitality of the organization and its work. This annual publication will be devoted to showing the multiple ways in which synthesis now shapes The Higher Learning Commission and its activities.

Our model of institutional accreditation has always been based on synthesis. Even in the Commission's early days, agreeing on the structure and end purpose of the accreditation process involved active participation by higher education institutions. Facilitated by the Commission's staff, institutions brought together various ideas about how best to measure and evaluate quality in institutions of higher education. From that, there emerged requirements and criteria to inform the judgment of quality, and the structuring of a peer review process to allow the judgment to be made. From time to time—yes, even today—the Commission engages its accredited institutions in testing the value of the existing model and exploring the need for improvements or changes in direction.

Today, it is not the act of synthesis that is new, but the multiple strands of ideas and interests that feed into the synthesizing process. It is no surprise any longer that everyone is trying to make heads or tails of a higher education world that seems to be changing nearly as fast as the leaves in a Midwestern Autumn. We at The Higher Learning Commission recognize that the higher education community is also trying to make heads or tails of change. Even if the conversation were to remain only among higher education institutions—which it increasingly is not—it is an extremely complex conversation to hold due to the profound evolution taking place in how we define and identify learning, and in how we structure the delivery of the learning experience. From the proliferation of eLearning and the virtual classroom, to the increasing diversity of the student body, to the blurring of traditional institutional boundaries and the formation of innovative collaborative partnerships, there is not one among us who isn't at least a little bit nervous about where his/her institution fits into this shifting landscape.

...testing the value of the existing model and exploring the need for improvements or changes in direction.

But the conversation about quality assurance in higher learning is no longer a conversation just among institutions. That is fundamental to understanding the Commission's new statement of mission:

> *Serving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning.*

In "serving the common good," the Commission must include in the conversation a much wider range of constituents—employers; community-based organizations; local, state, and federal elected officials and public agencies; other higher education related organizations; private and public charitable foundations; and student/learner organizations. With each new change in technology, in legislation, in demographics, the number of voices that need to be heard enlarges; the breadth of necessary partnerships expands. The Commission seeks to synthesize these voices and these partnerships to assure and advance quality in higher education throughout the North Central region. By doing so, we'll be positioned to make accreditation an essential tool for higher education in the 21st Century; one that gives higher education institutions the necessary flexibility for taking advantage of new opportunities and achieving their missions.

CONTEXT: 2001

BOARD PROFILE: Margaret "Peg" Lee

"My experience with the Commission has been long and deep. I've seen a tremendous amount of change over the last six to eight years and The Higher Learning Commission has been on the cutting edge in terms of figuring out how to interpret and deal with much of that change.

"We want accreditation to be less of something that an institution goes through because it has to or that it looks forward to only once every ten years or so. It should be uniquely integrated with each institution's life and practice, with the planning and evaluative nature of always trying to do better at the institution. We want to be seen as partners with our member institutions, not police.

"I think what we're moving into is multiple methodologies of doing the accreditation process that will be as unique as each institution is unique, which is very much in keeping with the way in which we have always done the accreditation process—mission driven.

"The Commission's own strategies and core values now imply that if we are to be mission driven we have to exemplify in our practices and processes the core values that we embrace. Therefore, the focus of our approach to accreditation has shifted away from the institution and the organization and the teacher to the learner, and to validating the quality of the learning experience. In other words, how do you know your students are learning what you are teaching them? And if you find out that they aren't, what do you plan to do about that?"

Margaret Lee, Vice President of the North Central Association Board of Trustees, is President of Oakton Community College in Des Plaines, Illinois.

Several projects were launched between 1999 and 2001 that aim to strengthen dramatically the Commission's capacity to synthesize effectively. These include:

Broader involvement of the public. In an effort to obtain better and ongoing involvement of the public in our work, the Commission has added 14 public members to its distributed decision-making structures. The Commission also conducted a focus group with business and community leaders as part of its Fall 2000 Board of Trustees meeting. The focus group will become a permanent part of our fall board meeting, which is held annually outside of Chicago at a location within the North Central region. Finally, the Commission engaged a variety of constituents in the Mission Project that resulted in the new statements of mission, vision, core values, and strategic priorities.

Restructuring Expectations—Accreditation 2004. In spring 2001, the Commission initiated a major review of its General Institutional Requirements (GIRs) and Criteria for Accreditation and designed a process to ensure broad stakeholder participation from among our many constituencies. The project will result in a gradual overhaul of our GIRs and Criteria for Accreditation that will be based, in large part, on input and feedback from our affiliated institutions during the next three years.

Collaborative Visits. The Commission accredits institutions. Technology, particularly on-line learning, is breaking down institutional walls. This presents a very interesting challenge, then, when a state-wide system (not an accredited entity) creates a collaborative enterprise for distance learning that involves multiple accredited institutions. The old model of doing multiple single institutional visits simply does not fit the new reality. Increasingly, therefore, the Commission innovates, primarily through different variations of collaborative visits. This issue of *Synthesis* features an example of how one collaborative visit unfolded.

Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP). Established in 1999 with grant support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, AQIP provides an alternative evaluation process for institutions already accredited by the Commission. The process is structured around quality improvement principles and processes and involves a structured set of goal-setting, networking, and accountability activities. Synthesis is reflected here in quality improvement principles that, although created through consultation with quality practitioners and research into quality assurance methods outside of higher education, are yet uniquely designed for higher education. For more information, read the partner profiles in this edition of *Synthesis*, and visit the AQIP web site at www.AQIP.org.

Assessment Workshops. These workshops, collaboratively designed and presented by The Higher Learning Commission and the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), aim to strengthen student learning assessment efforts at colleges and universities in the North Central region. In this situation, synthesis takes place both between organizations committed to effective assessment of student learning and among all of the teams of participants at each workshop. See the partner profiles in this edition of *Synthesis*, and visit the workshop web site at www.aahe.org/hlc for more information.

New Publications Program. The Commission Board of Trustees approved an expanded publications program for The Higher Learning Commission to signal a new direction in how the Commission communicates with its members and with the public at large. *Synthesis* is the first of many anticipated steps in this new direction.

In addition to these initiatives, the Commission continues to offer an extensive variety of programs and services to its affiliated institutions, including an assigned Commission staff liaison for each institution; publications and communication vehicles on self-study, evaluation, and institutional improvement; enhanced communication through our web site and email; as well as our Annual Meeting, held each spring in Chicago.

We have taken these steps in hopes of achieving a synthesis of all the parts of the Commission involved in supporting your pursuit of quality. Together, we can ensure that the many elements that comprise the world of higher education are aligned to support each and every student's pursuit of learning.

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The Higher Learning Commission is part of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The Association was founded in 1895 for the purpose of establishing close relations between the colleges and secondary schools of the region. Throughout its history, the Association has been committed to the improvement of education at all levels through evaluation and accreditation.

The Association is one of six regional institutional accrediting associations in the United States. Through its Commissions it accredits, and thereby grants membership to, educational institutions in the nineteen-state North Central region—Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming—as well as Department of Defense schools and Navajo Nation schools.

The Higher Learning Commission is recognized by the Secretary of Education and the Committee on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA, now continued under the Council on Higher Education Accreditation, or CHEA).

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"SERVING THE COMMON GOOD IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY"

Opening Remarks
The Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting
Hyatt Regency Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, April 1, 2001
(Excerpts)

Charlie Nelms

I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOUR DESTINY WILL BE, BUT I DO KNOW THAT THOSE AMONG YOU WHO WILL BE TRULY HAPPY ARE THOSE WHO HAVE LEARNED HOW TO SERVE.

— Albert Schweitzer

THIS QUOTE is from an essay by Albert Schweitzer, and, for me at least, it captures in a significant way what we are about as educators—teachers, researchers, and leaders—we are servants first. The quote by Schweitzer also speaks to the centrality of the theme of this year's annual meeting, **Serving the Common Good: New Designs in Higher Education**. Clearly, if we are to serve the common good we must be willing not only to consider but to embrace a host of new designs in higher education. As the great humorist Will Rogers once said, "The future isn't what it used to be!" And that is certainly true of higher education.

While on a recent drive to Ann Arbor to visit our son, who is a student at the University of Michigan, my spouse jotted down these thoughts for me on the back of an envelope (without knowing that I would be making these comments today). "The conference theme suggests a new agenda, an unfinished agenda, and an enduring agenda. If we are to achieve our mission of serving the common good, all that we do must be undergirded by a set of core values that celebrates the *means as well as the ends of education*. These core values include such things as *Learning*, *Quality*, and *Innovation*. But there is also

room for such values as *Diversity, Inclusiveness*, and *Service*."

As we continued our drive along isolated stretches of Interstate 69, I must say that I was intrigued, almost haunted by the thought of higher education serving the common good, but I could not escape such basic questions as: What do we mean by the common good? Whose needs and interests are included in the common good? Is the common good the same today as it was a few decades ago? Will it be the same two decades hence? What are the implications for serving the common good given current and projected demographic changes? How will technology impact our ability to serve the common good? And finally, as education practitioners, how do we hold ourselves, our colleges and universities, and this association, The Higher Learning Commission, accountable for serving the common good?

As a student of higher education and as a faculty person, I will readily acknowledge that raising questions is considerably easier than coming up with answers. Briefly, I want to share with you a half-dozen prerequisites that I believe must be fulfilled if we are indeed to serve the common good.

First, ***learning***—not courses or seat time—must constitute the core component of education. If learning is indeed the key requirement of the 21st century, the authors of the book, *Strategic Choices for the Academy*, suggest that we must view the person receiving the education differently. "A *student*," the authors note, "is taught by others, has little control over what he or she will be taught, and must fulfill institutional requirements. A student is often involved in passive learning, reacting to the stimulus of the instructors and confined to the road map of the syllabus. By contrast, a *learner* is an active participant in individual education. The learner interacts more assertively with the materials, with other learners and the instructor." We must also be willing to redefine what we mean by learning and become far more receptive to the fact that learning takes place in venues beyond the confines of the classroom and that faculty at their very best are facilitators of learning rather than instillers of knowledge.

Second, we must systematically examine the curriculum to ensure that we are preparing students to understand, to live, and to lead in a world that is becoming less defined by ethnic identity, socio-economic status, citizenship, geographical boundaries, or financial currencies.

BOARD PROFILE: Allen I. Olson

"We need to keep in mind that education—the delivery of learning and the transition of knowledge—is probably one of the most important responsibilities that one generation has to those following.

"The public deserves to be informed on the quality of the [educational] products that are out there. They need a sort of good housekeeping seal of approval agency, and The Higher Learning Commission fulfills that role.

"The challenge we face is looking at how the traditional model of a site-specific campus fits in with the wide range of new and emerging methods for delivering learning. And how does an organization like The Higher Learning Commission serve the common good if "the common good" can be defined in so many ways, and especially when the question of how education is delivered is seen by many as a value-judgment about what it means to serve the common good?

"In meeting this challenge, our standpoint is that the common good means taking on a broad, universal perspective, which includes not only diversity in student, faculty, and staff backgrounds, but diversity in the ways in which people learn and access that learning; that there are multiple valid ways for education and learning to take place which include, but may go beyond, the traditional model of higher education."

Allen Olson, a member of The Higher Learning Commission Board of Trustees, is President of the Independent Community Bankers of Minnesota, and is former Governor of North Dakota.

Third, we must make a more concerted effort to understand learning theories, student learning styles and needs, and we must be willing to embrace and employ a variety of instructional modalities.

Fourth, we must recognize and embrace more fully the use of technology as a tool for enhancing learning. Technology is here, it is only going to get better and become more pervasive. The question is, "Will we make optimal use of it in our educational institutions?" Having had the opportunity to observe from up close the positive effects of technology on teaching and learning, I would only suggest to those among us who see technology as a detriment, if not an evil force destined to undermine the quality of higher education and the role of faculty, to get over it. These are exaggerations to the worst degree that are better left in the imaginary sphere of the brain.

Fifth, we must be willing to hold ourselves accountable for serving the common good. I think of it this way: Learning is our goal, assessment is our tool, and accountability is a societal mandate. If we are to achieve our goal, i.e., learning, we must commit ourselves to using assessment outcomes to effectuate changes in what we do in our places of learning. In other words, the assessment plans that we develop and implement are for us, not NCA! I don't think that it is asking too much to expect our members to demonstrate how and the extent to which they impact student learning. Why shouldn't we be held accountable?

Sixth, if we are to serve the common good, we must escape the superficial boundaries that separate the K-12 and the postsecondary education systems to produce a better educated student, whether for the labor force or in preparation for entry into higher education. Having spent a considerable amount of time as a volunteer in the K-12 system, I have come to the conclusion that those of us in higher education can no longer afford to view public education as someone else's problem—it is our problem. And unless we see ourselves as part of the solution, we will be major losers in at least two ways. First, we will lose in the reduced flow of academically prepared students to our colleges and universities. Second, we will lose in the expenditure of scarce resources to provide remediation at the college level.

Seventh, if we are to serve the common good, we must approach student diversity with a new level of energy, interest, knowledge, and seriousness. There is a clear message in the recently released U.S. census statistics. They bear out what Harold Hodgkinson, a Minnesota demographer, has been telling us for the better part of a decade: the socio-ethnic diversification of America is real and it will transform not only the face of America but its very fabric as well. Our classrooms will look different whether we like it or not. And if we want to remain in business, we must accept this reality! The key question is whether our institutions will rise to the occasion of educating these new populations. Will we use our knowledge, expertise, and considerable talent pool of faculty and staff to reduce the economic and quality of life gaps between the haves and have nots? Is this not consistent with what it means to serve the common good?

By now you may be wondering what all of this has to do with regional accreditation. Well, I started with the supposition that there are these prerequisites that we must meet as institutions of higher learning if we are to serve the common good. So, I will close by suggesting three ways by which I believe accreditation, if done well, does indeed serve the common good.

Accreditation should, at a minimum, do three things:

- Serve as a public validation of a baseline of quality across institutional types;
- Provide a more rational basis by which consumers and supporters—governmental or philanthropic—can make rational decisions about whether or not to invest in a particular institution;
- Help institutions engage in quality improvement beyond external forces and influences.

If accreditation does not provide for at least these three outcomes, I contend that we have missed the opportunity to serve the common good and that we do not deserve the right to determine our own destiny.

As you go forward, whether as C-E's, presidents, self-study coordinators, or staff, I wish for you the very best as you seek to do well and good!

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CHARLIE NELMS, *a member of The Higher Learning Commission Board of Trustees and outgoing Chair, is Vice President for Student Development and Diversity, and Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. He is Chancellor Emeritus at the University of Michigan-Flint and former Chancellor at Indiana University's campus in Richmond, Indiana.*

The comments above are excerpts taken from a longer speech; the full text is available at the Commission's web site, www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org.

THE COMMON GOOD

"SERVING THE COMMON GOOD: CONSULTANT-EVALUATORS IN THE HEART OF PEER REVIEW"

Steven D. Crow
Executive Director
The Higher Learning Commission

I HAVE BEEN MAKING MUCH recently of our choice of words to begin the Commission's new mission statement: "Serving the common good." The small group that created the original draft of our various statements wrestled with whether to use "public good" or "common good." That short debate was enlightening. "Public" struck some as being political in nature, perhaps too nationalistic, and potentially open to an interpretation that might exclude some private institutions, particularly those with strong religious commitments. "Common" suggested the overarching importance of the good of humanity. That, I think, is how the term has been used by some theorists, theologians, and political scientists. Suffice it to say that to the creators of the first draft of our mission statement, "common good" appeared to encompass global contexts and interests. It seemed grander, loftier, and highly inclusive.

But on the speaking circuit, I have not been talking about such a broad and grandiose definition of "common good." Usually I just point out that we consciously chose not to say "serving higher education" or "serving students" or "serving" any other prominent constituency of the higher education community. For an organization created by institutions of higher education to do a specific piece of work on their behalf, it seems significant enough at this point simply to see in "the common good" a broader context in which to locate the Commission's accountability. With this mission statement, the Commission's accountability is to more than just its member institutions, for now we must challenge those members to be about the business of providing higher learning that contributes to the "common good." Moreover, we must evaluate our accrediting activities against that same measure.

If the Commission is going to be about the business of "serving the common good" through our activities, then either it has to do more than just accredit colleges and universities or it has to make more of the common good within its criteria for accreditation. Probably both.

One thing I hear is that in this student-driven, information-rich education marketplace, if we do not find a way to provide better and more useful information, we will not count for much. For the bulk of this past century, we have argued that our system of peer review simply should be trusted. It is still axiomatic with many in the accrediting community that institutions and programs will be forthcoming only if confidentiality is a central aspect of the relationship. Confidentiality is what lets institutions think of accreditors as partners rather than regulators. So, we will publish our standards and our processes, and we will publish the ultimate decision about accreditation. But we will not say much more. By and large, institutions apparently do not want us to say much more.

The public trust fundamental to that system no longer exists. The federal government lost trust thanks to the financial aid mismanagement of the 1980s that we appeared to overlook. Many states have implemented accountability programs because they have concluded that regional accreditation does not provide compelling evidence of educational effectiveness. Perhaps even more troubling, certain components of the higher education community appear to lose trust when accreditation is extended to the new, the different, and the non-traditional. AAUP's attack on the Commission for accrediting Jones International University was most damaging when this national organization of the faculty argued that the Commission's processes were so flawed as to make its criteria and requirements meaningless. Then we continue to hear Robert Atwell's argument that proof of good accreditation is institutions on sanctions or with no accreditation at all. If we are supposed to be serving our institutions in all this struggle over accountability, we are not doing it by maintaining secrecy. We are just making ourselves irrelevant. So, I think we can only serve the "common good" by finding better ways to testify to what we and only we know and how we came to know it. Better, more useful information: a new service, perhaps, even for our member institutions.

Not many years ago you might well have heard me speak about the vital role of accreditation in protecting the autonomy of our colleges and universities. Particularly in the U.S., we have made a fetish of our "non-governmental"—at times almost "anti-governmental"—role. Colleges and universities, some of us have argued, serve society by being separate enough from political, economic, and societal pressures to be objective commentators on the very society that sustains them.

American institutions of higher education exist because our society has determined that it is well-served by having institutions committed to the search for truth and to educating others to be searchers for truth. A variation of this case, of course, is that colleges and universities exist to ensure the transmission of culture through time. The search for truth and the transmission of culture clearly contribute to the "common good."

Therefore, an accredited college or university should be a place where intellectual inquiry is fostered and intellectual freedom protected: these are fundamental to the whole enterprise. By protecting institutional autonomy, accreditors protect intellectual freedom and the capacity of the college and university to do its higher work without interference. The link is not perfect, of course, but you don't have to scratch very deeply in the accrediting community to find that the two are closely linked. I think if you study our requirements and criteria you will conclude that they also are informed in large part by these understandings and assumptions.

This view of the university and its role in society may have made sense in a different time and age. I do not think it is particularly viable in a democratic society in which access to higher education is rapidly being viewed as a "right" rather than a privilege for the elite and wealthy. I question its fit in a society where a higher education degree serves as the entry-level credential to more and more of the jobs that pay well and promise career mobility. I do not think it is particularly viable in a capitalistic society in which higher education is a multi-billion dollar business heavily dependent on federal and state financial aid programs necessary for students to be able to attend. It does not fit well with a society in which access to private capital is now mandatory for public and private institutions alike. It is not particularly viable when the academic community seems more concerned about the discipline than about the shared task of assuring student learning. And it is clearly not particularly viable when institutions of higher education expand—and rightly so—their missions to include a lot more than "searching for truth." The higher education community has chosen to be the primary providers of education and training for the national work force. In a society in which lifelong learning is necessary for the majority of citizens, our colleges and universities have multiple responsibilities to highly diverse student bodies. So, I say, let's face reality: colleges and universities are intimately and eagerly intertwined with all sorts of financial, political, and social forces. Consequently, they have to be accountable for more than "sifting and winnowing" behind ivy covered walls.

What is the role of regional institutional accreditation in all of this? Protecting institutions from these demands for accountability? Protecting faculty from demands that degree programs be reconfigured to meet new student needs? Protecting faculty from demands that they collaborate not only within their institution but across institutions? Protecting institutions from expectations that they acknowledge what students know instead of what they have experienced (and here I am referencing the growing tension over credit transfer)? Can we really be serving the common good through all of this protectionism? I seriously doubt it. If peer review is simply a tool by which we define and implement protectionism, then its days as a powerful influence in defining quality in higher learning are numbered.

The fact is that the seeds for transforming higher education, for enabling it to fulfill its multiple responsibilities while still honoring academic freedom, are in the community itself. Neither business nor corporate universities provide the right model for this new higher education organization. But they do suggest some of the structures and tools that will be fundamental to the transformation of higher education from an industrial model to one that allows the learner to create an effective learning program tailored to need and learning style.

The search for truth and the transmission of culture clearly contribute to the "common good."

Our colleges and universities are so unaccustomed to entrepreneurialism, responsiveness, and creative collaboration that they do not always do a very good job at any of them. Many of us still cringe when we witness it because it seems, well, tawdry and suspect. But there is a new culture emerging within higher education. It is one in which the learning of students is central; it is one in which hierarchical structures give way to collaborative teamwork; it is one in which institutional boundaries blur when cooperation and collaboration provide better service to students; it is one in which success is measured by the achievement of clearly defined goals; and it is one that continues to hold as fundamental a commitment to unfettered intellectual inquiry and academic freedom. Many of you in this audience are part of this new culture while others will come to understand it through training and through experiencing it on site visits. Peer review, then, can continue to be a vital force in self-regulation for the common good.

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The comments above were adapted from a speech presented at the Consultant-Evaluator Professional Development Program at The Higher Learning Commission 2001 Annual Meeting in Chicago on March 31, 2001; the original, full text is available at the Commission's web site, www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org.

Collaborative Visit Profile: North Dakota University System Online

When the North Dakota University System (NDUS) began exploring how to expand its degree offerings to the Internet, it turned to The Higher Learning Commission to help it sort through the range of options that would enable the North Dakota system to utilize new learning technologies in ways that would continue to support its mission and sustain quality.

Since 1998, the North Dakota System has been a pilot site for the United States Department of Education Distance Education Demonstration Project. This is a project that was authorized by Congress where, on a pilot basis, the Department of Education could recognize either single institutions or consortia of institutions where some distance education financial aid rules might be waived. North Dakota's focus in that project is to create a system-wide consortium agreement for financial aid whereby students are able to take courses from any campus and, as long as it applies towards a degree on one campus, the student's tuition costs may be met through financial aid.

In deciding how to craft the consortium, North Dakota sought the assistance of The Higher Learning Commission. "One of the challenges of creating the consortium was that none of our 11 campuses had specific authority from the North Central Association to offer an online associate's degree," explains Mike Hillman, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs with the NDUS. One option the North Dakota System had was to wait until each and every campus had applied and been approved to do that, which would be very time consuming. Or, they could form an entity through which all the campuses could provide not only associate's degrees, but bachelor's degrees and other programs. But the degrees would be from the individual campus, not the consortium. And thus, the idea for the **NDUS Online** was born. "The idea really came about during our consultation with staff from the Commission," Hillman adds.

In addition to deciding what type of coordinating mechanism they would create, the NDUS also had to define some parameters for how the 11 campuses would deliver learning content for the degree programs. This also had ramifications for the financial aid pilot project. For guidance, they consulted members of a statewide advisory group comprised of more than 60 people, including 22 legislators, approximately 20 business and industry representatives, and approximately 20 higher education professionals, including North Dakota State Board of Higher Education members. The advisory group made a number of recommendations, but a key recommendation was that the NDUS needs to look at improving access for a wider range of students, particularly those over the age of 35.

For Hillman, the advisory group's recommendation meant that the online system had to be tailored to the needs of a less traditional student population, one that was more likely to be time-bound and/or place-bound. It also meant that all offerings through the **NDUS Online** had to be tailored to this population, not just the associate's degrees. The dilemma they faced was that **NDUS Online** would essentially be a surrogate; not itself an accredited degree-granting entity, but having to guarantee the same level of quality for the degree programs that were offered under its

auspices. Since only an online associate's degree would be offered initially, **NDUS Online** had to create a functional structure that would anticipate future programs and degrees, including four-year baccalaureate degrees, and be able to guarantee a consistent level of quality regardless of which of the eleven campuses would offer it.

Bob Larson, Director of **NDUS Online**, elaborates: "We were asked by The Higher Learning Commission to conduct a self-study and develop a document that described how we would deal with the issues of distance delivery. That document, then, would become a measuring tool for campuses that are members of the consortium to deliver other degree programs online. Now, what that campus may elect to do, rather than trying to put all the courses out there including all of the general education classes, that campus may collaborate with **NDUS Online** through our common course numbering system, for example, and **NDUS Online** would certify that, yes, this degree is being offered by this campus, which is part of a collaboration."

"One of the challenges to creating the consortium was that none of our 11 campuses had specific authority from the North Central Association to offer an online associate's degree."

Mike Hillman
Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
North Dakota University System

It looked great on paper, but would it prove to be workable in reality? That was the question on Hillman's and Larson's minds after they submitted the **NDUS Online** self-study document to The Higher Learning Commission in March of 2001 and awaited their site visit.

The visit took place in June 2001. And, according to Hillman and Larson, the Commission's evaluation team came with an ample number of questions, such as, "How do we plan to do it? How do we plan to evaluate it? How will we assess student learning and utilize the results to improve the system? Which campuses are going to do what pieces of this?" Larson says that the **NDUS Online** administration tried to answer these questions with examples of what the NDUS was already doing well to prove that the capability was in place for quality assurance of future programs. "But the team really kept coming back to what we didn't have in place yet," adds Larson, "because, essentially, we were asking them to approve something that was still largely undefined. Even in that first online associate's degree program, some courses were in place, some were under development, some were planned. So we were asking them basically to give us authority to approve future programs in addition to this first one which was used as an example, but we didn't even have the first one completely done at that time."

But the visiting team did recommend approval of **NDUS Online** and that it be granted the authority it needed to certify future programs, but not without some concrete recommendations for some focused work, such as sorting out how student assessment will occur and creating a 24/7 online helpdesk. The reason for the approval, according to Hillman, comes down to trust.

"I think that because we had already formed a partnership with The Higher Learning Commission, there was a level of comfort with what we were attempting that would not have been there had we just sent in an application out of the blue for such an experimental initiative. In my mind it's a great step forward for an accrediting agency to extend its trust in this way and to be willing to move the process along so quickly. Higher education can sometimes move like a glacier. This makes it possible for us to respond more quickly to changing market needs."

Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP)

A GREAT EXAMPLE of The Higher Learning Commission's synthesizing of various elements in the shifting higher education landscape is the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP). Initiated in July 1999, with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia, AQIP's goal is to design an innovative, more challenging alternative process for reaccreditation, one that engages institutions by increasing the tangible benefits it delivers to them.

As such, AQIP is a project that necessarily draws upon all of the available resources of the Commission and challenges us to find new ways to coordinate those resources for increased benefit to our members. Challenging indeed! And yet, so far, since its inception, we have witnessed a growing sense of renewal, energy, and enthusiasm for the reaccreditation process, both among institutions participating in AQIP and among Commission staff.

Some of the main components of AQIP include:

Interest Exploration. The Interest Exploration is required of all new institutions that wish to participate in AQIP, and occurs before the institution formally joins the Project. The Interest Exploration is a period of time during which AQIP expects an institution to learn about quality principles and discuss whether such an approach makes sense for the institution. Some institutions have already explored these matters fully, while others may need a year or more before they can make an informed decision.

Comprehensive Self-Assessment. Also required, the comprehensive self-assessment must be completed prior to participation in the project to provide a baseline for recognizing an institution's improvement opportunities and for setting quality stretch targets that will be developed in the Strategy Forum.

Strategy Forum and Systems Appraisal. These form the core of AQIP and consist of a continuous loop that participating institutions repeat every 3-4 years, depending on the institution's goals, its demonstrated progress in improving its processes and results, and the maturity of its quality improvement systems.

AQIP workshops. These workshops, produced in cooperation with quality improvement and other educational organizations, help higher education leaders better understand how systematic quality improvement can assist their institution to flourish.

Collaborative Quality Colloquia. The Colloquia provide a network for groups of independent institutions whose administrators, faculty, and staff to interact as they work collaboratively toward the establishment of quality cultures at each campus.

Expanded network of quality consultants. AQIP draws off a diverse range of facilitators, coaches, consultants, feedback writers, editors, analysts, and many other people qualified and trained to participate in this dynamic new approach to quality improvement and quality assurance.

The Pew funded piloting of AQIP will continue through December of 2002. By that date, our objectives are to:

- design and field-test the new reaccreditation process;
- train both institutional personnel and evaluators in quality improvement approaches;
- rigorously evaluate all aspects of the new process in order to refine it;
- publicize the availability of the alternative process and its potential benefits throughout the higher education community; and
- involve one- to two-thirds of the Commission's member institutions in the design, operation, and staffing of AQIP, either directly—through institutional participation in the Project—or indirectly, through AQIP Reviewer training or attendance at other AQIP programs.

To date, we are progressing toward these objectives, with more than 50 institutions having joined AQIP. The accompanying AQIP Partner Profiles are just a few examples of how institutions are responding to AQIP and how they are utilizing its resources to enhance quality at their institutions. We are very pleased with the stimulus AQIP has provided and are optimistic about its potential impact on the reaccreditation process. With the support and participation of our affiliated members, the Commission foresees continuing to offer AQIP long into the future. (Please see the AQIP web site <www.aqip.org> for more information.)

The AQIP Quality Criteria

1. **Helping Students Learn...**identifies the shared purpose of all higher education organizations, and is accordingly the pivot of any institutional quality analysis.

2. **Accomplishing Other Distinctive Objectives...**addresses the processes that contribute to the achievement of an institution's major objectives that complement student learning and fulfill other portions of the institution's mission.

3. **Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs...**examines how a quality-driven institution, knowing it will ultimately be judged by all of those external or internal individuals and groups that have a major stake in the institution's success, works actively to understand their needs.

4. **Valuing People...**allows the institution to demonstrate its commitment to the development of the talents of all of its faculty, staff, and administrators, since the efforts of all are required for institutional success.

5. **Leading and Communicating...**addresses how an institution's leadership and communication structures, networks, and processes guide the institution in setting directions, making decisions, seeking future opportunities, and building and sustaining a learning environment. The leadership system includes not only those who have day-to-day supervisory or decision-making responsibility to manage the institution, but also the oversight entities such as institutional or state boards, or trustees.

6. **Supporting Institutional Operations...**addresses the variety of institutional support processes that, while they do not directly impact student learning, help to provide an environment in which learning can thrive.

7. **Measuring Effectiveness...**examines the information system the institution employs to collect and use data to responsibly manage itself and to drive performance improvement.

8. Planning **Continuous Improvement...**examines how an institution aligns what it wants or hopes to do with what it actually does.

9. **Building Collaborative Relationships...**examines an institution's relationships—current and potential—to analyze how they contribute to the institution's accomplishing its mission.

AQIP Project Partners

ACT

American Society for Quality (ASQ)

Continuous Quality Improvement Network (CQIN)

PEW Charitable Trusts

Plexus Corporation

AQIP Partner Profile: Concordia University

Academic Quality Improvement Project
The Higher Learning Commission NCA

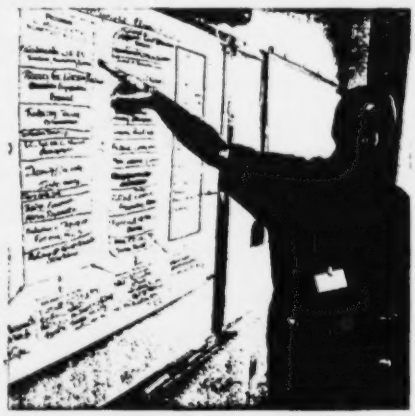
> "The Commission has made the case that AQIP is really intended to help us achieve our mission more effectively."
>
> George C. Heider
> President
> Concordia University

Founded in 1864 as Concordia Teacher's College, Concordia University is located in River Forest, Illinois, in the western suburbs of Chicago. With 2,000 students, it is the oldest and one of the largest of ten independent Concordia University campuses across the nation, each of which is affiliated with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Concordia offers a wide range of bachelor's degree programs and recently began offering Doctor of Education degrees in Early Childhood Education and Educational Leadership, making it the only Lutheran university outside of Europe to offer academic doctorates.

Through the AQIP process, Concordia seeks to integrate the strategic planning process and the accreditation process. According to George C. Heider, Concordia's President, "We want to move away from the situation whereby everyone runs around every ten years doing a self-study, which then goes on the shelf for nine years until we do it again. My sense is that, while AQIP is likely to be more work over ten years than traditional accreditation, we'll actually get something out of it."

Concordia is in the process of narrowing its goals and objectives for AQIP to the "vital few," i.e., priority initiatives that can truly have a widespread impact on the way Concordia organizes the teaching and learning for its faculty and students. For example, one priority at Concordia is figuring out how to better manage enrollment. The university struggles with how to distinctively clarify its unique contributions to higher education in order to attract and retain those students who can best benefit from the educational experience at Concordia. At the same time, Concordia's revenues are ninety percent student dependent, with most of the remainder comprised of a subsidy from its sponsoring church body that will disappear in the near future. Therefore, its greatest challenge is maintaining or increasing enrollment in a highly competitive education environment, while at the same time creating an endowment that can replace the subsidy it has been relying on for so long.

Heider sees AQIP as an important tool for helping the university to achieve its goals. He says, "The Higher Learning Commission has persuasively made the case to me and the faculty that the AQIP approach to accreditation is really intended to help us achieve our mission more effectively. One of the things an independent religious institution always has to guard is its distinctiveness. And I think this process does allow an institution to do just that."



AQIP Partner Profile: Crowder College

Academic Quality Improvement Project
The Higher Learning Commission NCA

> "...the AQIP program has been perhaps the most constructive change in accreditation that I've seen during my 25 year career in education."
>
> Kent Farnsworth
> President
> Crowder College

Located in the rural, southwest corner of Missouri, Crowder College is a comprehensive, public community college with an enrollment of approximately 1,000 full-time equivalent students. As a comprehensive community college, Crowder offers traditional technical and transfer-oriented degrees such as Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, and Associate of Applied Science, as well as customized, non-credit industrial training programs that serve between 12,000 and 16,000 employees of companies throughout the region each year. It also serves as the region's administrative entity for Adult Basic Education and for a vocational school that serves five high school districts in the region.

Crowder was already beginning to prepare a self-study for evaluation for continued accreditation when the college's president, Kent Farnsworth, heard about the AQIP alternative reaccreditation process and the Leadership for Quality in Education workshop. According to Farnsworth, Crowder's administration had been disappointed with the way the accreditation process had occurred only once every ten years. They wanted something that would help them look at institutional improvement on an ongoing basis.

Farnsworth and his team developed three goals to bring to the AQIP Leadership workshop, during which the goals were reexamined in detail and one was eliminated and replaced. The three goals are to: 1) Improve Crowder's personnel evaluation system for faculty, staff, and administration; 2) Create a professional development model that is tied to the institution's strategic plan and to the objectives of the personnel evaluation system; and 3) Improve the academic advising system by making it more proactive.

The impact of the workshop and the AQIP process has already taken hold at Crowder. Says Farnsworth: "We've had a sense all along that we weren't as data-driven as we needed to be. We weren't generating the kind of information that would allow us to make the best decisions in all cases, and I think that's very characteristic of higher education in general. The AQIP process forces us to be more data-driven. Frankly, I think the AQIP program has been the most constructive change in accreditation that I've seen during my 25 year career in education. And the workshop was the single best institutional planning workshop that I've been to.

"Crowder College is the only Missouri community college participating in AQIP right now, and one of my colleagues said, 'Why are you giving in to a business model to manage a higher ed organization?' My response is that it's not a business model, it's a quality improvement model. I think The Higher Learning Commission is way out in front in terms of thinking about how you make institutions better and that AQIP is a masterstroke in terms of improving higher education in the country. We're just very excited to be a part of it."

AQIP Partner Profile: Fort Hays State University

Academic Quality Improvement Project
The Higher Learning Commission NCA

> "For the first time, we have a situation where everyone understands how quality pervades all corners of the University."
>
> Robert Scott
> Assistant to the Provost for Institutional Effectivenes and Assessment
> Fort Hays State University

Fort Hays State University, founded in 1902, is a rural, regional state university located in north central Kansas. The university's primary emphasis is undergraduate liberal education, which includes the humanities, the fine arts, the social/behavioral sciences, and the natural/physical sciences. It also has a Graduate School that offers master's level degree programs. The University has a large service area, comprising 44 of Kansas' 105 counties, and has a total annual enrollment of between 5,500 and 6,000 students.

Distance learning is not a new concept to Fort Hays State. Because of its location, the University began developing distance learning programs in 1977 and by 1990 had developed a robust set of computer-based distance learning programs in the arts and sciences, business, education, the health and life sciences, and agriculture. Still, the 1990s gave University leaders a glance into what they saw as an emerging and different higher education reality, over and above issues of delivery of learning content. A reality that needed to be responded to carefully and strategically. Larry Gould, Provost and Chief Academic Officer, explains:

"The monopoly that public higher education institutions had on the learner was all but gone. Competition was, and still is, everywhere, much of it driven by a new kind of learner—a savvy population of working adults who know what they want from higher education and whose time is extremely limited. You also saw, and continue to see, a call for greater public accountability; the call for universities to offer higher value at lower cost. Distance learning is just one of many possible responses to these situations."

Like many colleges and universities, Fort Hays State tinkered with what they refer to as "bits and pieces" of total quality management (TQM) and other business process reengineering approaches. "But none of it stuck," says Robert Scott, Assistant to the Provost for Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment.

Enter AQIP. Scott and Gould recognized AQIP as the first approach to quality with the potential to comprehensively address the challenges of the changing higher education environment. The results of their participation in the initial AQIP workshop was the clarification of four goals around which their strategic planning efforts are now organized: 1) To develop an Applied Arts and Sciences Degree and facilitate the transfer of student credits from community colleges for those interested in pursuing the degree; 2) Reengineering the student information system; 3) Fostering a strategic enrollment environment in which all university departments are recruiting higher levels of students; and 4) To map out, clarify, and update the procedures and policies for its virtual college.

While the AQIP process has allowed the level of flexibility and entrepreneurship necessary to focus on these four specific

goals, Scott and Gould are quick to emphasize the broader impact of AQIP. "For the first time, we have a situation where everyone understands how quality pervades all corners of the University," Scott says. "There is a sense of ownership, from the Deans and Provost, to the faculty, all the way to the folks who run the motor pool."

Gould adds, "We are now bringing together all of the elements that are necessary for us to achieve quality... strategic planning, information/ knowledge management, customer service, student support services...AQIP allows us to focus on these things in a way that we never could before."

BOARD PROFILE: **David B. Burks**

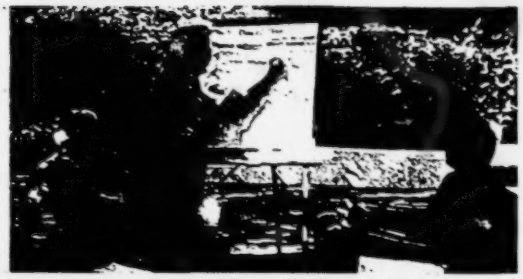
"I am very pleased that the Commission's Board has gone through a highly collaborative process to come up with the new mission statement, the core values, and the strategic priorities. Yet, there is still one major piece of work yet to do: we've got to implement new standards that reflect the Commission's new direction and that reflect the changes that are taking place in higher education.

"This really is a different era for us in higher education. Institutions are becoming increasingly global, open institutions. They're doing business, they're offering courses, not just in one city, or one location, but throughout a whole state in many instances, or throughout the country or the world in other instances.

"The bottom line is that all of us, whether it's The Higher Learning Commission or the other regional accrediting groups, are going to have to do a better job of figuring out how we can effectively deal with institutions that are operating in a global environment. And right now, we struggle with that."

David Burks is President of Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas. He is the incoming Chair of The Higher Learning Commission Board of Trustees.

Joint Commission / AAHE Assessment Workshops



For The Higher Learning Commission, synthesis often means calling upon the resources of others in our peer network in order to create solutions that are needed by our affiliated institutions. For example, we partnered with the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) to introduce a workshop in June 2001 that focused specifically on helping institutions to examine the role of student learning assessment in quality, strategic planning, and accreditation. The goal of the workshop, entitled, "Changing Institutional Priorities: Developing a Shared Understanding of the Value of Assessing Student Learning," is to strengthen institutions' assessment efforts by giving them the tools they need to transform their institutional culture into one that embraces change and integrates student learning assessment into the daily flow of academic life.

Enrollment in the workshop was purposefully limited to twenty selected teams from North Central regional colleges and universities. We sought a core group of institutional representatives with a range of assessment challenges who would not only benefit from the design of the workshop, but who would also provide guidance into the evolution of future workshops based on their expertise in trying to tackle student assessment challenges in the field. Participants developed individual plans, processes, tools, and strategies that would cultivate a collective and shared understanding of the value of assessing student learning within each institution's unique educational environment and culture.

Following the success of the initial workshop, AAHE and The Higher Learning Commission are offering this two-day workshop several times a year at sites across the region. These workshops will continue to assist North Central accredited colleges and universities in their efforts to incorporate the assessment of student achievement into this quality improvement process. See the workshop web site www.aahe.org/hlc/ for more information.

The accompanying Assessment Partner Profiles describe the impact that the workshop has had on how assessment is now viewed at just two of the twenty North Central institutions that participated. However, their stories are representative of the excitement that grew out of the June workshop; the excitement of having a closely knit network of peers all working together to get their hands around a slippery and sometimes elusive animal called student learning.

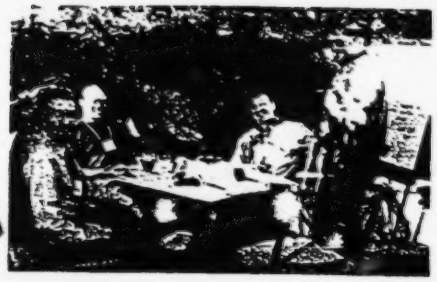
Assessment Workshop Objectives

- Developing an understanding of the assessment process, such as articulating outcomes, identifying methods to assess those outcomes, interpreting results, using the results to improve teaching and learning, and informing institutional decision-making and planning.
- Adapting campus models and best practices that work.
- Developing a plan for institutional change that involves a shared understanding and commitment to assessing student learning.
- Presenting assessment to the campus as a process based on institutional curiosity about what and how well students learn.

Assessment Workshop Teaching/Learning Strategies

- Large blocks of time are built into the two days for teamwork, consultation with facilitators, and team-to-team meetings to learn from the practices of others.
- Plenary sessions focus on changing institutional cultures, learning about student learning, and defining assessment as a means of answering questions about learning.
- Concurrent sessions deepen participants' areas of interest through various pedagogies: presentations, problem-solving, and inquiry-based workshops and labs.
- A capstone experience at the conclusion of the workshop serves to disseminate each campus's plan.
- Several topics are covered through various teaching/learning formats, including:
  - Positioning Your Institution for Change
  - Identifying Institutional Strengths and Strategies to Build Commitment
  - Learning about Student Learning
  - Articulating Expectations for Student Learning and Development
  - Identifying Methods to Assess Student Learning
  - Interpreting Assessment Results
  - Communicating Results to Inform Pedagogy, Decision-Making, Planning and Budgeting
  - Making Learning an Institutional Priority

Assessment Partner Profile: Northland College



Northland College is a small, private liberal arts college in northern Wisconsin with an enrollment of approximately 800 mostly full-time students. The college, which is 108 years old, was founded as an affiliate of the United Church of Christ. In 1972, the college revised its four-year bachelor's degree curriculum to include a heavy emphasis on environmental studies. Since then, it has grown to attract students from 47 states and nine countries.

In February 2001, a team of Higher Learning Commission consultant-evaluators conducted a periodic review at Northland College. While the college did very well in the review, the consultant-evaluators expressed concern about its progress on academic assessment.

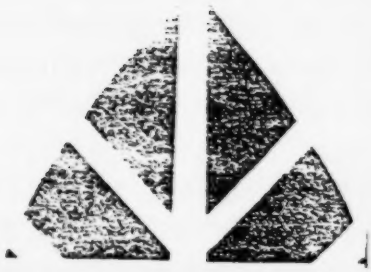
Les Alldritt, Dean and Vice President of Northland College, explains, "We had long felt that we could be doing better with academic assessment. The team's visit galvanized us to begin exploring different structures that would better support the full integration of assessment into the everyday academic life of the college." Soon after, Alldritt read about the Commission/AAHE joint workshop on academic assessment. Northland applied and was chosen as one of 20 colleges and universities to participate.

Alldritt assembled an assessment team that included himself, the registrar, the assessment coordinator, an English professor who had already been doing work on writing assessment, and a math professor/statistician with a strong interest in academic assessment.

"We really did not know what to expect at the workshop," Alldritt adds. "We didn't know how well it would work and how well we would bond as a team and come up with some very concrete ways to start implementing improvements in our academic assessment. But it worked quite well." Alldritt and his team emerged from the workshop with a clearer sense of direction and goals for the academic assessment program over the next two or three years. For example, this Fall the assessment team was reformulated into a standing committee of the faculty senate, reflecting the work that Alldritt and his team have done in getting Northland's faculty to take ownership of the assessment process. The next step, as Alldritt sees it, is to work toward the long-term goal of acculturating assessment into the everyday work of teaching and learning at Northland.

"We'll continue to work closely with The Higher Learning Commission to achieve that goal," says Alldritt. "The Commission has always upheld a high level of professionalism. It really is a peer-driven process. But I think more than peer, it's collegial; the Commission can bring together huge comprehensive institutions and smaller colleges like Northland and help all of us to find common ground and ways of sharing and mentoring each other."

Assessment Partner Profile: Minnesota State College - Southeast Technical



Located about 60 miles apart, the southeastern Minnesota towns of Red Wing and Winona are home to the two campuses of Minnesota State College - Southeast Technical. Established in 1949, the Winona campus is nationally known for its Aviation Maintenance Technician program. And the younger Red Wing campus, which opened its doors in 1973, is renowned for its string and band musical instrument repair program. However, there is more to the College than just aviation and musical instrument repair. Together, the two campuses offer a diverse array of occupational certificate and associate's degree programs ranging from 10 to 72 credits, including a proposed Associate of Science in Nursing degree. Altogether, there are approximately 1,400 full-time-equivalent students, or 1,600 headcount, at the College.

Minnesota State College had been looking at how to improve its student learning assessment efforts since 1992, when it began preparing for its initial NCA accreditation. Accredited in 1994, the College then participated in a visit in 1996 that focused specifically on its assessment process. The results of the visit confirmed what the College's administration already knew, as Ron Matuska, Vice President for Academic Affairs of Minnesota State College, explains:

"We've always done a good job at assessing student learning and collecting the kind of data that could be used to measure student progress against learning outcomes. Since much of our curriculum is hands-on, we've had that built-in from the beginning. Where we've fallen short is in connecting the data we obtain from student assessment to the operational level of the College...particularly in the budgeting process and the strategic planning process."

> "Where we've fallen short is in connecting the data we obtain from student assessment to the operational level of the College..."
>
> Ron Matuska
> Vice President for Academic Affairs
> Minnesota State College

This message came through again after the College's reaccreditation visit in 2000. And with another focused visit on assessment scheduled for 2004, Matuska knew that they would have to figure out how to address this gap.

Then Matuska received a flier describing the joint Commission/AAHE assessment workshop. "What was intriguing about the workshop," he says, "was that there was a selection process. They weren't taking anybody who signed up. Plus, it was an opportunity to be part of a group that would create the process that would inform future workshops. That was different."

Matuska and his team were happy to find out they were selected and were eager to learn what others were doing in the area of assessment. "As a technical college, we had always thought that our issues and challenges were unique compared with other colleges and universities," he explains. "Instead, we discovered that there are real commonalities among all institutions."

Matuska says two aspects of the assessment workshop hit home for him and his team: 1) The built-in format of sharing successes and peer mentoring among institutions; and 2) The emphasis on a shift "from climate to culture."

"What we gained the most," he adds, "is renewed energy and validation that we are on the right track. Assessment is something that has always been a part of our climate; we've been able to see it and point to it, but never to truly examine it up close. We walked away from the workshop with the ability to gain wider acceptance for the role of student learning across campus. It is now better positioned in our overall strategic planning process, which means it has greater chance to become a part of our day-to-day culture."

Partner Profile: Linking AQIP and Assessment

Kent State University

Kent State University in northeastern Ohio is a large, comprehensive public university serving more than 32,000 students. Among the student population, approximately 6,000 live on-campus at the main campus in Kent, Ohio; 6,000 live off-campus in Kent; and the remaining 20,000 commute to either the main campus or one of seven regional campuses spread across a geographic area that includes Cleveland and Youngstown, and which is nearly the size of the state of Connecticut. Kent State is a research intensive university that offers bachelor's, master's, and doctorate level degrees, as well as associate's degrees at its regional campuses.

Needless to say, managing and sustaining quality at an educational enterprise this large presents significant challenges. Over the past ten years, the University had attempted to implement a number of total quality management (TQM) initiatives to strengthen its ability to manage its own growth and ability to respond to the changing demographics of its students. Terry Kuhn, Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies, says that many at the University, "seemed to think that the concept of continuous improvement was the right one, but some of our previous efforts did not seem to have a lasting impact."

Similarly, Kent State's efforts at assessing student learning were more what Kuhn calls, "hopes and desires," but not too much realized. "We knew it was something that we needed to address," he adds, "but we just hadn't figured out how to do that in a real way."

Then Kuhn came across an announcement for participation in The Higher Learning Commission's pilot Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) (see p. 10). AQIP hit a chord with the University's administration because it offered an alternative to the traditional ten-year cycle of accreditation, which was considered by the University to be not as effective as it could be. Before applying to be a participating institution, however, Kuhn wanted to be sure that he had the support not only of the administration, but of the faculty and staff. He presented the idea to more than 15 groups of faculty and staff from across the eight campuses and received highly favorable responses. "I think AQIP gave people the promise of looking at and improving how we do things more frequently than every ten years, and they seemed to want that," Kuhn says.

After applying and being accepted, the University formed a small advisory group. Through participation in several workshops, the advisory group learned concrete methods for integrating the University's strategic planning process with the implementation and budgeting processes. However, the group knew that in order for the AQIP process to take hold at Kent State, it had to share what it had learned with other areas within the University. To do this, group members used the annual university-wide Internal

Kent State University

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>
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> Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies
> Kent State University

Planning Conference as an opportunity to acquaint deans, academic and support area department heads, and faculty from all eight campuses with AQIP.

As a result of that conference, each department emerged with an assignment that would help the University to meet the requirements of the AQIP Entry Assessment. Each department is currently reviewing its own strengths and opportunities for improvement, and looking at them in relation to the nine AQIP quality criteria (see p. 11). A 50 member, university-wide steering committee was also formed during the Internal Planning Conference and that steering committee is conducting the same exercise from the standpoint of the university as a whole. The next step, according to Kuhn, is for each of the departments and the steering committee to develop three to five action plans based on their initial self-assessments. Kuhn expects these to be ready for implementation in the 2002-2003 academic year.

Kent State also has embarked on a major effort to bolster its commitment to assessing student learning. Kuhn says that the AQIP process actually opened the door to a broader conversation about student learning assessment at the University and was a factor in the decision to participate in the assessment workshops produced jointly by The Higher Learning Commission and the American Association for Higher Education (see p. 16).

"Some areas of Kent State have been literally hopping with regard to learning assessment, while other areas have yet to begin," he explains. "We've never really concentrated on how to get all parts of the University to do assessment at the same level, consistently, and in ways that the information collected about student learning can be made useful throughout the University. The workshop gave us an opportunity to step back and think about how assessment affects, or should affect, our whole commitment to quality. In this way, it overlapped perfectly with what we've been working on through AQIP. It gave us a realistic appreciation for the range of things we needed to accomplish in order to foster a culture of acceptance about doing student assessment in a different way. And, most importantly, it gave us a forum for learning from other institutions that are facing similar challenges to those at Kent State."

Kuhn is optimistic about the new life that he says has been breathed into the attitudes of Kent State faculty and administration toward the reaccreditation process. The future holds much promise at Kent State as it delves deeper into its commitment to improving the quality of the teaching and learning environment.

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